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MEMORIAL WEEKEND KICKS OFF SUMMER VACATION SEASON

The first holiday of the 1998 vacation season should bring heavy traffic flows if the weather remains warm and dry, the California Highway Patrol (CHP) predicted today as it prepared for Memorial Weekend coverage.

The holiday period begins at 6 p.m. Friday, May 22 and extends through midnight Monday, May 25. Last year 49 died during the 78-hour Memorial Day weekend, a total identical to that in 1996 and 1995. "Our No 1 objective is bringing that figure down this year," CHP Commissioner Dwight Helmick said.

The commissioner cautioned drivers to "match their driving schedules to the possibility of congestion by starting earlier, both to and from weekend locations." He advised drivers to "think safety and act accordingly—observe speed limits, use your turn signals, maintain a reasonable following distance."

He issued a reminder that alcohol "often goes with holiday celebrations, but don't let alcohol become a factor in driving. Pick a designated driver—someone who drinks no alcoholic beverages and handles the behind-the-wheel responsibilities for your group. It's a practical way of keeping alcohol from turning the holiday into a tragedy."

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The commissioner noted that the Memorial Day holiday comes at the end of Buckle Up America Week. “We announced last Tuesday that our next goal is 90 percent safety belt use in California,” Helmick said,. “California stands at 87 percent now, best in the nation, so we’re close.

“If you don’t buckle up regularly, make it a Memorial Day resolution to start now. The safety advantage of wearing a belt—and buckling the very young into safety seats—is impressive. The figures don’t lie. Safety belts and safety seats double the chances of surviving a crash.”

Travel typically rises in summer months, boosted by vacationers and weekend visits to mountains, the beaches and other high-use recreational areas. “If we can reduce Memorial weekend casualties, we start summer on the right note. The Highway Patrol wants this to be the safest summer in memory.” Commissioner Helmick said.